
BALKAN LEADERS PLEDGE TO KEEP OUT MIGRANTS

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Leaders along the Western Balkan migratory route, which saw 1 million people pass through last year on their way to Germany and northern Europe, pledged not to let the influx repeat this year ahead of a migration summit in Vienna on Saturday (24 September).

Austria's chancellor and foreign minister on Tuesday urged joint EU action on tightening Europe's external borders and sending aid to countries where most migrants leave from.

The chancellor, Christian Kern, a social democrat, and foreign minister, Sebastian Kurz, a conservative, spoke on Tuesday (20 September) in the sidelines of the UN general assembly in New York.

"There is now an understanding in the European Union that we have to stop the flow of illegal migrants, and that we need border controls to our external borders," Kurz said, according to the AP news agency.

Both Austrian coalition parties are under pressure from the far-right Freedom Party, which leads in polls ahead of a presidential election in December.

But Kurz downplayed that role of the far-right in Austria's increasingly tough stance on migration and borders.

"I don't think this is a far-right position. It's a necessary position," Kurz said.

Kern has convened a regional summit for Saturday to harmonise policies.

Germany's chancellor Angela Merkel and Hungarian prime minister Viktor Orbán, seen as leaders of opposing camps in Europe's debate on how to handle the refugee crisis, will attend the event.

In the meantime, the EU is gearing up to launch the European Border and Coast Guard on 6 October in Bulgaria.

The border force will pool member states' resources and help those countries which are most affected by the refugee influx.

In New York, Balkan leaders warned that they are not ready to take in large numbers of migrants.

Serbia's foreign minister Ivica Dacic told the UN summit that his country is not keen on building

walls on its frontiers but also has no capacity to give migrants long-term accommodation.

We do not want to erect walls and we are ready to show solidarity and take part of this burden, but as a country that faced problem with its own refugees, we do not have the capacity to shelter huge numbers of migrants, Dacic said, according to the Tanjug news agency.

Croatia's president Kolinda Grabar Kitarovic said on Tuesday that in the event of a new migrant wave her country could not let refugees pass through, as its borders with Slovenia and Hungary are closed.

"I do not think that we rose to the occasion [last year], she said.

Secondary movement

Meanwhile, the Greek mainland remains mostly off-limits for the more than 4,000 asylum seekers who have been displaced by a fire in a refugee camp on the Greek island of Lesbos.

Greek authorities are struggling to find housing for people who were left homeless after the blaze on Monday night which, according to police, destroyed 60 percent of the Moria camp.

They sought to house around a 1,000 people on ships by Wednesday (21 September), as many returned to the camp after the fire.

The European Commission said on Tuesday transfers from the island to the mainland would be limited.

"To avoid secondary movement to the rest of Europe, that means keeping asylum seekers on the islands for the most part," said a commission spokeswoman.

An EU-Turkey migration deal from March requires migrants to stay on the islands until their asylum request is processed. Those whose request is denied are returned to Turkey.

The Moria camp houses some 5,700 asylum seekers, while Greek islands host around 60,000 people, according to the UN.

Tensions

Aid agencies warn that the slow process of the asylum procedure, and dire conditions in the camp create tensions among those crammed on the island.

Mondays fire reportedly started when there was a misunderstanding about transfers back to Turkey.

Roland Schoenbauer, UNHCR's spokesman, said people were "sick of waiting" in the camps.

"They don't know when their asylum claims will be processed. Some people feel they don't have enough information," he was quoted as saying by the Reuters news agency.

No casualties were reported from the fire, but nine people were detained in connections with the blaze.

Since the EU-Turkey deal came into force in March, just over 500 people have been deported to Turkey, but nobody who requested asylum in Greece was among the deportees, Greece says.

In the meantime, building began Tuesday on a wall in the northern French city of Calais to stop migrants from hiding on trucks heading to Britain.

The British-funded, 1-kilometre long wall will cut off the migrant camp, known as the Jungle, which aid groups say houses more than 10,000 people.

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